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MUSICAL ALLUSIONS OF GREAT WRITERS

By CLEMENT ANTROBUS HARRIS

IN 1894 Professor Waldo Pratt, of Hartford Theological Seminary, read a paper before the Musical Association in London on "The Isolation of Music." Therein he complained of the neglect of music in both popular and scholarly thought, and sought to demonstrate the natural affinities of music with literature.

If the services rendered to the Divine Art by great writers are to be judged by their length and number, the charge may be justified. But if, on the other hand, the criterion is to be quality and universality, the indictment certainly falls to the ground. For there is no branch of literature, whether we take Philosophy, Poetry, or Romance; no age in the history of letters; no country known to the lover of books, which has not laid a tribute generous in value if small in bulk, at the feet of Apollo. Rather it is musicians who, though now amending their ways, have too often been more disposed to carp at the occasional technical errors of literary men—a disposition excusable in the case of many novelists—than to recognize the immense debt which their art owes to the pen.

True, histories and text-books apart—which C. F. Becker estimated at 6500, in 1839—works of high literary quality wholly devoted to music are but few in number. James Harris's "Discourse on Music, Painting and Poetry" (1744); James Beattie's essay on Poetry and Music, written at Aberdeen somewhat later; H. R. Haweis' "Music and Morals," and Mr. Filson Young's "Meistersingers" have few companions. But from Plato and Aristotle and their Chinese contemporary, Meng-Tse, who deal at length with the art, to the present day, allusions to music among the world's greatest writers are innumerable. The Church Fathers, Justin Martyr, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Chrysostom, Augustine, pay court to Religion's handmaid almost as a matter of course. So do the statesmen Boëthius and Cassiodorus and many other Latinists. Among philosophers, Lord Bacon in the "Advancement of Learning," commends the poets for having conjoined *Music and Medicine in Apollo*: because "the office of medicine

is but to tune this curious harp of man's body and to reduce it to Harmony." Burton, in the "Anatomy of Melancholy," occupies many pages in declaring "Music a Remedy." Owen Feltham, and Henry Peacham, in the "Compleat Gentleman," (1634) both discourse at length "Of Musicke," especially vindicating its extreme antiquity and classical status. Sir Thomas Browne in "Religio Medici" (1642) vies with the churchmen, the "Judicious Hooker," of a previous century, Bishops Joseph Hall, and John Earle, in extolling music as truly the Divine Art. The great diarists, John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys, record their musical impressions, especially Pepys, who was himself a musician of no mean attainments. and has placed historians of English music under a heavy debt, Samuel Johnson's lack of ear and definition of music as the "least objectionable noise" did not prevent his making more discriminating remarks at other times, if one may trust Boswell. In more recent days, Landor, de Quincey, and Cardinal Newman, all make a longer or shorter pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Cecilia. Readers of the latter's University Sermons will recall an especially fine passage, beginning: "There are seven notes in the scale; make them fourteen; yet what a slender outfit for so vast an enterprise! . . . Out of what poor elements does some great master in it create his new world."

The Cardinal was a violinist of some repute among his friends. His great antagonist, Charles Kingsley, would probably have agreed with him on this subject if on nothing else, for whereas others have called music "the speech of angels," he "will go further and call it the speech of God Himself," and, like the Greeks, regards it as a great corrective of self-will. A great New World preacher, H. W. Beecher, sees in it more of an intellectual quality: "Music," he says in the "Plymouth Pulpit," Sermon ii., "cleanses the understanding, inspires it, and lifts it into a realm which it would not reach if it were left to itself." Emerson and Ruskin were obviously not very sensitive to the cunning hand of Jubal, "charm he never so wisely." Albeit the former has an appreciative paragraph on vocal music in his "Essays," if he casts something of a slur on oratorio—which he appears to regard as purely instrumental and out of touch with life! Ruskin, on the contrary, in "Lectures on Architecture and Painting," under-rates solo singing at the expense of concerted music! It is otherwise with those very different writers, Henry Thoreau and Herbert Spencer—their estimates of "the literature of the heart", as Alphonse de Lamertine calls music, have notable elements in common. "Let us hear a strain of music" writes the New World

dreamer, "and we are at once advertised of a life which no man has told us of." "Those vague feelings of unexpected felicity which music arouses—those indefinite impressions of an unknown ideal life which it calls up, may be considered as a prophecy," writes the Old World philosopher; and he declares as a consequence that music may "take rank as the highest of the fine arts—the one which, more than any other, ministers to human welfare." Among living writers of prose Mr. Arthur Balfour may be cited to much the same purpose, in his "Foundations of Belief." The very shiftiness which his political opponents accuse him of, his friends attribute to his passion for truth. And to get at truth he gives literature the go-by and argues the question from music "partly because, unlike architecture, it serves no very obvious end, and we are thus absolved from giving any opinion on the relation between beauty and utility; partly because, unlike painting and poetry, it has no external reference and we are thus absolved from giving any opinion on the relation between beauty and truth." The great Conservative statesman is far from being the only philosopher to point out the unique value of music on account of its abstract quality. Witness Schopenhauer: "It stands apart from all other arts. In it we do not recognize any imitation, reproduction of an Idea of the things of the world; yet it is an art. . . . surpassingly glorious."

It is perhaps natural that poets should have found more themes for their work in music than have prose writers. Anyway it is the case. The earliest extant poem with a musical ascription is probably that of Anacreon "To His Lyre," written about 500 B. C. In Europe the Latin verses written by the monk Wulstan in praise of the remarkable organ built in Winchester Cathedral by Bishop Elphage in the 10th Century would appear to have a good claim to priority. Following these it is difficult to find anything earlier, or at least better known, than the German poem "Frau Musica" by Martin Luther. In England, especially during her Golden Age of Music—Elizabeth's reign—examples are abundant. Of many one may mention "A Song to the Lute in Musicke" from "A Paradise of Dainty Devices" believed to be by Richard Edwards, 1523-1566 (*see* Percy Reliques Book ii. p. 199. These verses occur in *Romeo and Juliet* and are sometimes attributed to Shakespeare); "In Praise of Musicke" by H. Gifford (1580); "For a Musician" by George Wither (1588-1669); "To Musik to becalm His Fever," and some dozen others by Herrick. Between these and present-day British writers to whom this article practically limits itself, space will admit of reference to

no more than Milton's apostrophe of Henry Lawes; the Songs and Odes to St. Cecilia by Dryden, Nicholas Brady, and Pope; the "Ode to Apollo" by Keats; "Ode on Æolus's Harp," James Thomson; the Ode for Music ("Passions") by Collins; the "Power of Music" by Dryden and Wordsworth; the "Fancy Concert" by Leigh Hunt; "Music," and "With a Guitar," by Shelley.

Nor are the seers of the nineteenth century behind their forbears in devotion to Apollo. For several examples which might be quoted from Longfellow it is sufficient to refer to his "Picture of Ole Bull, the Celebrated Violinist"; while a similar compliment has been paid to a modern fiddler, Sarasate, by Eric Mackay.

Browning was an accomplished pianist, and what is more rare, had a considerable knowledge of harmony. Consequently his works show a greater technical insight into the art, and his musical poems form a more important part of his output, than is the case with any other poet, ancient or modern.

It will be observed that Browning prefers pebbles rather than monoliths from the musical quarry. As his heroes are merely spokesmen, or audience, for his own thought, perhaps it is as well. But in the case of writers content to paint a portrait, one is glad that the great composers are not neglected. Nevertheless, such portraits are fewer than might have been expected. Among the chief are Eric Mackay's "Beethoven at the Piano-forte" and Mr. John Todhunter's verses "To Rossini," which latter show an accurate appreciation of that composer's peculiar place in the firmament of music.

If life were but a Bacchanal procession
Of sensuous joys, thou wert its great high-priest.

Browning's "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" is, of course, an imaginary character. One could wish that the pitiful treatment by his contemporaries of the world's greatest song-composer, many of whose finest works were sold for tenpence, had also been imaginary. But alas, no! and the "too, too solid truth" has stung Elsa D'Esterre Keeling into some justly reproachful verses on "The Neglect of Schubert."

Composers as a guild or craft meet with poetic recognition in a fine ode by Arthur W. E. Shaugnessy to "The Music-Makers;" and the poem has just met with musical recognition in a setting by Sir Edward Elgar. In connection with the more general

aspect, Victor Hugo's seven stanzas "Que la Musique" may be mentioned; likewise Arthur H. C. Clough's ode "Music," raising the question

Are there not two musics unto men?
 One loud and bold and coarse

 The other soft and low.

Nationality is an important factor in music. And since it has been little recognized by poets there is the more need to mention Walt Whitman's lines on the effect "strangely fitting even here" of "Italian music in Dakota." It is not often that an individual example of the music-maker's craft affords a subject for the maker of verses. One wonders, not without a leaning to the negative, whether Browning had any particular "Toccata of Galuppi's" in mind when writing the poem under that title? He was avowedly indebted to Schumann's "Carneval" for several stanzas of "Fifine at the Fair," but the piece forms neither the title nor the main theme of the poem. A Chaconne by Bach is referred to by George Eliot in one of her poems, and likewise Mendelssohn's Wedding March by Coventry Patmore, but in both cases the allusion is merely a passing one. Nor is it often that one poem forms the subject of more than one opera. It was therefore a happy thought of Mr. Theodore Watts to write three Sonnets on "Faust" as musically interpreted respectively by Berlioz, Gounod, and Schumann.

A volume would be required to do justice to the passing allusions of poets to music. Nay, several volumes! For the various anthologies of musico-poetic references only to some extent overlap each other and by no means exhaust the subject. Suffice it to say that of the seventy-five greatest English-speaking poets from Chaucer to Swinburne, only nineteen find no place in three anthologies which lie before the writer! Of these more than half-hundred masters of song those most frequent in their allusions to the sister art are Shakespeare, who uses the word "music" 140 times, and Shelley, who perhaps equals him in frequency, if not in directness. Chaucer, Milton, Keats, Moore, and Longfellow follow with, roughly, some two-thirds the number of references. Wordsworth, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Swinburne may fairly be bracketted third.

No aspect of music has escaped the ear of the poets. For with the advent of Browning certain technical harmonic features previously overlooked come under review:—

Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

What those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—'Must
we die?'

Those commiserating sevenths—'Life might last! we can but try.'
A Toccata of Galuppi's, VII.

Here it is worth observing that in a single poem, "Charles Avison," Browning mentions no fewer than five musical forms, such as Sonata, Fugue, Suite; nine instruments, and fifteen composers!

It is interesting to the worker in sounds to notice those characteristics of his art which have appealed most strongly to the worker in words. Poets, not less than philosophers, find in music a meaning purely its own, a marvellous power to express that which can be experienced through no other medium:

It speaks a language to the world unknown.

James Montgomery.

And through the stream of music tell
Its else unutterable spell.

Matthew Arnold.

Angel of Music! when our finest speech
Is all too coarse to give the heart relief,
The inmost fountains lie within thy reach.

"The Music-Master"—William Allingham.

Music! oh, how faint, how weak,
Language fades before thy spell!
Why should feeling ever speak,
When thou canst breathe her soul so well?

Moore.

But God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear;
The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know.

Abt Vogler.—Browning.

Instead
Of words, sought sounds, and saved for ever, in the same,
Truth that escapes prose—nay, puts poetry to shame.

Fine at the Fair.—Browning.

Of its more purely physical effects nothing in music seems to have struck the poet mind so strongly as its cadences—the grace with which it ends: a cynic indeed might hint that to the

maker of verses music is more beautiful in dying than living! Such a stab would not, however, wound either poet or musician very deeply, for according to Charles Sackville, Earl of Dorset (1637) there is a music

That dies in every note,
As if it sighed with each man's care
For being so remote.

And Keats speaks of music as it reaches not one, but "each delicious ending."

Whether it be a strain which
Had a dying fall

or un-named instruments hearing which even Shylock might

Make a swan-like end,
Fading in music. . . .

or the "Harp of Life" which

Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, passed in music out of sight;

or Dryden's "soft complaining flute" which

In dying notes discovers
The woe of hapless lovers;

or "The horns of Elfland faintly blowing," the end is always the same:

Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying.
Tennyson (Locksley Hall; Princess.)

Among other of music's virtues on which the poets sing in unison is its fitness as the voice of Love; and its power to awaken memory. On the other hand they are somewhat divergent as to the respective merits of loud music and soft; and also as to its gladness or sadness, though a large majority find more of joy in it than sorrow.

It would be peculiarly inapt to estimate the value of poetic services to the musical workman by the number of his implements enumerated. Nevertheless it is not without a bearing on the subject that while showing a marked partiality for the harp, lyre, and lute, the bards have allowed few instruments to wholly escape them. Indeed the sackbut, and such modern inventions

as the harmonium and concertina, appear to be the sole omissions. And even this latter instrument is included if, under the heading of poetry, we admit such burlesque verse as the Bab Ballads! Moreover a just appreciation of the balance between wind and string instruments may be claimed as having been shown by the practically equal references made to the organ and violin or fiddle. It must be admitted, however, that the searcher must be either much favoured by chance, or very diligent, before he comes across recognition of the oboe, bassoon, clavichord, spinet, guitar, clarinet, flageolet, fife, cornet, bagpipes, and some others. Nevertheless they are to be found by a patient enough investigator. Strange to say, despite a reference in the "Jolly Beggars" to the tuning of the pipes, he need not look for actual mention of Scotland's national instrument in Burns!

It follows as matter of course that when, discarding alike the deeps of philosophy and the heights of imagination, a writer draws his inspiration from the hearthstone and the events of daily life, the most social of arts cannot long be absent from his pages. The origin of the novel can be traced to the remotest antiquity. Historians declare that the germs found in the oriental *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesta* were probably not the earliest. Æsop, Xenophon, and John of Damascus are later examples, followed in turn by the "Arabian Nights" and "Don Quixote." But the rejuvenation of romance, the evolution of the novel as we know it, was contemporary with that extraordinary cloud of artistic decadence which spread over Eastern Europe during the 18th century, and which is known in Germany as the "Zopf" ("pigtail") or stilted period, with which may be compared the French "style perruque." Of its effect in England it is sufficient to remind the reader that the first Oxford undergraduate who attempted to play the piano in public was hissed off the platform—not for playing badly but for playing at all! The miasma was only dispelled by the rise of the Romantic School.

The novelist, not less than the playwright, does but "hold up a mirror to nature." Hence not till the novelist had gone far on his way, not, indeed, till the male wielder of the pen was being rapidly overtaken in the field of fiction by writers of the gentler sex, did—at least in Great Britain—a romance appear with a musician for its hero. The honour of being pioneer rests with Elizabeth Shepherd for her "Charles Auchester": the book, which appeared in 1855, is said by some to represent the early life of Mendelssohn, by others, of Sterndale Bennett. The two composers had much in common and musical readers are not

agreed. For some twenty years the work stood alone, the only one of its kind. Not till 1875, or thereabouts, did its first companion appear in "Alcestis," an exceeding able study of musical life in Dresden in the time of Hasse (1699-1783). Much more rapidly did others follow, inspired doubtless by the phenomenal success which attended Miss Jessie Fothergill's "The First Violin," which appeared in 1878. Chief of the many which have since appeared may be mentioned "The Dominant Seventh" by Kate Clark; "The Minor Chord" the first whose author, J. Mitchell Chappell, I take to be one of the "Sons of Jubal" rather than a "Daughter of Music" to quote Solomon's phrase. The scene of the two last named lies to a great extent in America. Edna Lyall's "Doreen: the story of a Singer," has less musical interest than the title would suggest: Rita's "Countess Daphne" has more—the authoress is spokeswoman for the violins. Mr. Marion Crawford's "A Roman Singer"; Hall Caine's "The Prodigal Son"; Allen Raines' immensely popular "A Welsh Singer"; Lucas Cleeve's "From Crown to Cross"; and E. F. Benson's "Sheaves" also claim inclusion.

The study of mental phenomena being so marked a feature of our age, and its ethereal characters so marked a feature of music, it follows as a matter of course that the art would not escape the psychological novelist with a purpose. Hence we find Tolstoy in "The Kreutzer Sonata" attributing a peculiarly diabolical wife-murder to the "terrible effect" produced on the husband by the *Presto* of the sonata which gives the book its title. It may reassure timid readers unfavourably disposed to the summary despatching of spouses to know that the sonata in question is the most popular of its kind ever written and has never been known to lead to a breach of the Sixth Commandment! Moreover the great Russian elsewhere in the same book speaks of music as "the noblest of all arts." So inviting, indeed is the "herald of life to come" as Swinburne calls music, to those who would lift the veil, that two writers depicting life beyond the veil have recently and simultaneously chosen a musician as their subject quite independently of each other. Namely, Mr. H. A. Vachell in "The Other Side," and Mr. Arnold Bennett in "The Glimpse." Considerably prior to these writers Mr. Du Maurier, in "Trilby" made use of music to illustrate the supposed possibilities of hypnotism. If, however, the book is as unreliable scientifically as it is musically, its main effect on the mental expert will be a ceaseless reminder that its author was one of the most brilliant members on the staff of "Punch!"

In view of so considerable an output of musical novels, it is strange that so little should have been made of the art in the short story. In Germany, it is but fair to say, the neglect is not so marked as in this country. Witness the works of Elsa Polko, who to her musical biographies, poems, and novels, has added short stories which, despite hyper-sentimentality, have had an immense vogue.

In regard to passing allusions, it is at first sight strange that the novelist—supposedly an expert in the actualities of life—should be much more prone to error than the poet. A little thought, however, will show that it is this very dealing with the actualities, with its necessity for prosaic detail and material circumstances, which ensnares the writer of romance. The poet deals only with the *effects* of music: the novelist with its implements: and it is these exigencies of narrative which betray him into details requiring more technical knowledge than he possesses. Hence much sport to the readers of musical papers, for they are frequently regaled with the woful bungling of fiction writers whose musical ambition has outrun their discretion. Papers have also been read before the learned societies of music, and magazine articles written, on the same entertaining theme. Perhaps the commonest mistake is in ignoring the very limited capacity of stringed instruments, even under the bow of an expert, for harmony—the playing of chords, and the impossibility of sustaining them. Paganini startled his expert hearers by continuing a chord to some extent, but only by one of his several tricks—loosening the strings of his bow. Yet in “A Roman Singer” we have “great broad chords, splendid in *depth* and royal harmony, grand, enormous, and massive as the united choirs of heaven,” all on one violin! And as if this thaumaturgic performance was not enough, we are told later on of the chord of A minor being “sustained” while the player, a Jew, “imitated the sound of a laughing voice.” No musician would have been able to laugh: he would have been too thunder-struck! It is a pity that novelists do not try to themselves perform at least the simpler feats they attribute to their characters. Had Ouida and Mr. Du Maurier attempted to sing two notes at a time the former would not have represented a heroine as singing “glorious harmonie” all by herself, or the latter Trilby as performing a similar feat. But were all the musical absurdities extracted from “Trilby,” nothing of the art in that engaging romance would remain. And Mr. Sutherland Edwards has been cruel enough to say much the same of Mr. Haweis’ “Music and Morals”—though, forsooth, that book is

not a novel. Putting chronology aside, we read in "The Last of the Barons" that "many voices of men and women joined in deeper bass, with the shrill tenor of the choral urchins." Was Lord Lytton anxious to find how many mistakes he could compress into eighteen words? Women do not sing bass or "urchins" tenor; the tenor is not a shrill voice, and the term "choral" is not usually applied to a number of voices singing the same part—"tenor" in this case: "unison" is the term used.

Even Charles Reade, who really did know something about music—at any rate about old violins—was on dangerous ground when he ventured on details of musical technique. In "Peg Woffington," for example, he makes the famous actress whistle a quick movement upon a huge paste ring, and then tells how Mr. Cibber was confounded by "this sparkling *adagio*." A quick movement which is at the same time an *adagio* is enough to confound anybody. Victor Hugo, in "Les Misérables," has three violins and a flute playing some of Haydn's quartets at a wedding. It is exasperating of that very Teutonic and Celtic Frenchman not to have told us where a copy of these quartets by the Father of Instrumentation for four instruments of *practically identical pitch* can be obtained! Mr. George Meredith and Marie Corelli are generally so rhapsodic—not to say burlesque—in their musical references as to defy criticism of detail. Nevertheless the author of Beauchamp's Career, in a passage otherwise unusually discriminating, includes the dulcimer and drum among organ stops—two of the few instruments never imitated in the King of Instruments.

But enough of this: especially as experts themselves are by no means infallible. That never-failing butt of their wit, the bag-pipes, has proved itself also the cause of their confusion. Its wind being supplied direct from the player's own lungs, it would at first sight appear impossible that anyone could both play it and sing at the same time. Hence much merriment of musicians at the expense of a novelist who had depicted a Highlander as singing snatches of national song the whiles he played the national instrument. But it so happens that the wind-reservoir of the Scottish pipes, though not the Irish, will allow of the chanter being played for an appreciable time between the inflations. Consequently, if not needing to rest his lungs, the player, after filling the bag, can sing a few bars before he need blow again. And no less expert an ear-witness than Sir Frederick Bridge has heard it done. "He laughs best who laughs last" and the surviving smile in this case must undoubtedly be awarded to the novelist.

Occasionally the makers of books, especially novelists, do more than merely refer to music in their works: they quote it in music-type. "Rita's" book "Countess Daphne" (1880) was, I believe, the first in which this was done systematically as a heading to the chapters, though in "The First Violin," published two years earlier, a chapter is headed by a quotation from one of Raff's symphonies. Charles Reade, in "Hard Cash," was probably the first to quote a folk-song—*Eileen Allannah*; and his example has been followed by Beatrice Harraden, whose "Kathleen Trensham" contains several examples of Swedish national songs. The axiom "verify your references" is not less necessary in regard to musical than literary quotations: and errors are by no means unknown even in the apparently simple work of transcription. A friend tells me of an author who, not content with perpetrating one of the most excruciating harmonic progressions known—"consecutive fifths"—must needs do it on the cover of his book and in notes of gold! Perhaps, however, the composition was original.

But it must be admitted that the most usual error of the romance writer is an exaggeration of the musical prowess of his heroes and heroines. And he would be a surly son of Jubal who thought only of these too generous tributes and forgot many encomiums of the art not less discriminating than eloquent. Witness J. H. Shorthouse:

Every lovely fancy, every moment of delight, every thought and thrill of pleasure which music calls forth, or which already existing, is beautified and hallowed by music, does not die.

Or Hall Caine, in "The Prodigal Son":—

The musician is the international artist. Other artists—the Poets, for example—require translators, but the musician needs no go-between. He uses the one universal language, and when he speaks the whole world may hear. What a gift!